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THE SCHOOL AND CURRENT FICTION^{*}

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The question as I understand it is this: What can the fiction of the day do for our students in the high school? What good can they get from it? What good are they actually getting? What benefits are they missing? And, most important of all, what are we to do about it? What use, in short, are we who educate to make of this potent instrument of education?

By current fiction, I mean two things: first, the stories accessible through current magazines; secondly, novels and collections of short stories available in book form. I shall, however, regard as a current novel any novel that is running at large where the pupil may find it. He knows nothing about its date. All he asks is that it look young. Ulysses asked no questions about the age of Calypso. I will read, in this connection, a boy's list of the books that he has liked: "Barbour's books, Dudley's books, Shakspeare's books, Dickens' books, Ellis's books, Castlemon's books." He rises, you observe, above any petty provincialism of time. To him all good books are contemporary.

Current fiction, then, includes all magazines recently issued and all novels that are at present accessible to the ordinary reader. And the first question for us to answer is, What good can a student get from reading these? I feel no hesitation in saying that from the right fiction he may derive almost as much philosophy, quite as much inspiration, as from any other source whatever. From all fiction, except a small residue, he may draw some benefit. In its humblest function, a good story gives rest, recreation, and entertainment. In its highest, it gives an interpretation of life, a sense of the author's answer to the eternal question, "What is worth while?" This philosophy, this sense of the significance of

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life that underlies all the greatest fiction, is as important in its influence upon the shaping of character as the advice of father or mother or the counsel of any preacher. It is often far more important. To measure its influence, we have only to recall how far our own relation to life has been shaped by the novels we have read. Here, then, can we but use it, lies ready to our hand a mighty instrument for good.

I do not mean that at the outset young readers care for fiction of the moralizing type. All fiction, however, even the boy's story of adventure, has its value. Love of stories of adventure is an essential part of boy nature. It is a need that results from the uneventfulness of sheltered lives. The bad man of a western mining town seldom read a dime novel. He didn't need to. If he wanted excitement, he had only to steal a horse or call another man a liar. We, of a modern town or city, missing adventure in real life, seek it in fiction. Of course this may become indulgence, even dissipation. In such a case games and sports may afford an alternative outlet; but they merely reduce the need, and any human boy still calls for stories of action. These stories, however limited their message, seldom fail to teach and even to inspire. The young hero is one who bears pain calmly, who faces danger with resolution, who dares death unflinchingly, who helps the weak and puts down the oppressor. He has not a little in common, after all, with Lancelot and Galahad.

The moral qualities of even the sensational juvenile story—though they may be only the moral qualities of the Red Indian—are still moral qualities. The good qualities of the desperado, the pirate leader, the detective who tracks the criminal may be only a part, a small part of character, but they are at least a part, and are that part which—by Nature's plan—is built first.

Even the adventure story, then, does some good. It can play its part not only in entertainment, but even, within its limits, in developing manhood, and it leads, if we make it so lead, to books that will do far more, that will shape worthy ideals of life and character. So much fiction may do. It remains to see what it is actually doing and to consider what we can do to further its work.

What I shall say about the actual reading of students is based

upon a number of lists—about two hundred—in which students have set down the novels they have read within the year, and the magazines they read habitually.

Several facts stand out at first sight: Many students read a bewilderingly large number of novels; some students read no novels at all—read no magazines, not even daily papers. Some show a most amazing variety in what they read. To some extent these facts are to be traced to differences in personality and mental endowment. To a greater degree they are traceable to circumstance. Some pupils come from reading homes, others from homes where books are unknown. One has a mother who has read Scott and Dickens aloud to him. Another's mother wants to know, probably in dialect, why he wastes his time on such foolishness. Now the best way to learn to like good literature is to have parents who like it and help one to like it. Failing of this, the best way is to fall under the right teachers. Our problem is how, in the case of the pupils under our charge, we are to fill this parental responsibility. How are we to teach them to like what it is best for them to like? How are we to overcome the force of circumstances?

Our first opportunity lies in the ordinary routine of the classroom—in the teaching of the fiction required in school. We might, by means of these works, train the student to like good novels. Instead we often turn him against them. The fault is in the way we teach.

In the first place we are inclined to analyze and study structure. We go into motives and obstacles and climaxes—as if our object were to develop future novelists and not merely to train future readers. Our second mistake is that we expect a boy or girl reading a story to remember more about it than an interested reader naturally will. When we read for pleasure, we do not read in order to remember. Conversely, when we read in order to remember, we read without pleasure. When I read a magazine story because I like it, I remember certain things—the atmosphere of the whole, the chief action of the story, the behavior and personality of some of the actors. But I feel quite sure that I could not answer correctly the questions that a very precise teacher, who has taught that book for five years, might, with the textbook

open before her, devise for my confusion. It is easy to see why the student, with the fear of questions ever before him, cannot really enjoy what he reads.

The result of this distaste extends beyond the books studied. For these novels set for reading are put before the boy as samples. They are meant to tempt, to show how alluring good fiction is. The way to make a pupil read Dickens after he leaves school is to make him like the novel of Dickens he reads in school—to make him enjoy it so much that he will, like *Oliver Twist*, ask for more. You cannot make him like it by cross-questioning him about it and marking his answers. If Romeo had had to pass an examination upon Juliet, he would have fled the sight of her.

The task of luring a wild and untamed young person to like good novels is difficult. You can't say, "Enjoy this or I'll box your ears." You must coax and be diplomatic, and so lead him, bit by bit, into liking what is best for him. We have opened good literature to him only when we have got him to the point where he *seeks it of his own accord*.

Have we accomplished this? Have we done anything in this direction? Out of our class of thirty, ten boys, as a result of home training, come to us liking good fiction. Twenty have no idea how to enjoy a novel of the type we set before them. Do we show these twenty how to enjoy it? Or do we merely see that they read it? How many of these twenty leave us better able to enjoy a good novel than when they come to us? There is the measure of our success.

Here, then, lies part of our task, the part that lies within the range of our everyday teaching. There is, however, another part, the part that lies outside the required reading, the part that concerns us as friends and advisers of the pupils whose future—so far as taste for reading goes—lies largely in our hands.

Let us analyze the problem before us. Our pupils, roughly classified, fall into several groups. First comes the boy who reads no novels. Possibly he merely needs awakening. Possibly the talk of the other boys and their example will arouse him. Frequently, however, he is of the latest type developed by our remarkable civilization, the type that, with the help of certain daily

papers, is reverting into the mental state of picture-writing savages. With moving pictures and the comic series-pictures of the daily paper, he is ceasing to care about reading. Why bother to construct mental images from descriptions, when he can have real pictures directly before his eyes? If he reads, he reads only headlines, or the inscriptions that explain the antics of A. Mutt or Babbling Bess. Why read the *Tale of Two Cities* or the *Vicar of Wakefield*, when he can sit back and see it all without effort in a moving picture show?

He is our hardest problem—so hard a problem that I feel that when the grammar school has given him up and left him helpless upon our doorsteps, there is little hope for him. The only chance is in getting him to like some of the novels studied in class, or even easier and more attractive ones privately recommended. There must be some little spark of possible interest, and the right book may rouse it.

This class is small—in the high school. The really large class is made up of those who are impatient of more words than will just convey the action. The reader of this class wants juveniles and stories of sensational adventure, of pirates, burglars, and desperadoes. There must be “something doing” in every paragraph. We must show him that he is not really getting what he wants. The books that he likes are not good in their kind. The action is lively, but not real. The characters get no grip. Even the “sanguine credulity of youth” begins at the age of fourteen to have its doubts about Alger’s boy heroes. All we need to do is to lead the boy on to something better. Show him good stories of action—action that is plausible, that fits the actors, that is presented so that it takes hold of one. Show him such stories as this, and he will forsake Alger and Henty—even Diamond Dick and Nick Carter, to follow where you lead.

As I have said before, athletics or out-door sports will reduce an abnormal appetite for tales of adventure. Of this antidote, every wise school makes use. The boy’s appetite, reduced in violence, will have a chance to become more discriminating. Show him good fiction and he will forsake rubbish. A dog that is well fed at home will not eat out of garbage pails. The thing for us

to do is to compile a list of good stories, stories full of action. Let it be a royal list. Let it contain stories old and new, Doyle, Dumas, Kipling, Morgan, Robertson, Marryat, Clark Russell, Lover, Lever, Bullen, Connolly, Stevenson, Beach, Jules Verne, Sienkiewicz, Jack London—all the men who, with a bit of the boy in them, have told compellingly of deeds on land and sea. It mustn't limit itself to the big men. It must include all who tell their stories well, no matter if there are dozens of teachers of English who have never heard of them. At the right stage, the better juvenile writers—Trowbridge and Brooks, for instance—will serve their purpose.

From these it is easy to lead into literature more serious and more significant. We can lead from Dumas to Victor Hugo, from *Monte Cristo* to *Les Misérables*. It isn't necessary that the boy give up his taste for the story of event—some boys never do till they die of old age. We should merely build upon it a superstructure of more thoughtful reading.

I have said so far little of girls. Some girls, from the point of view of literary training, are like boys. In any event, the case of the girl is analogous. Sometimes, she too likes adventure stories. Perhaps she envies the adventures, perhaps she merely admires the heroism of the man who undergoes them—and wishes she knew a boy like him. Usually she wants a love story. The boy puts up with it as a necessary explanation of "why they fought." To her it may be the center of interest. Both boy and girl demand a happy ending, though he is content to have the story stop when the hero's sword goes through the villain's heart. She wants wedding bells. His lowest depth is Diamond Dick, hers is Laura Jean Libby. As for her possible taste for Marie Corelli and other effusive geniuses, that is merely another symptom of youth. Let it take its course. We are absurdly afraid that our young people will develop a taste for "fine writing." Since our college professors rebuked it in us, we, forgetting that we are not college professors, censure it in these younger people in whom it is perfectly normal. Without it, they would lack what makes youth.

In our present society, the girl of the high-school age gets little wholesome outlet in games. Home life and so-called "social

life" may, however, furnish a substitute of a sort, and, as in the case of a boy, one can point the way to really good stories—stories of healthy romance and wholesome sentiment. There are the Rebecca books and *Emmy Lou* and *Little Women*—there are capital stories of that sort. As to novels of a higher type, there are any number of our American novelists who, lacking in force and depth, excel in charm, in tender sentiment, in just the appeal that will reach her. In fact our average new American novel seems—perhaps is—written especially for the schoolgirl or very young woman. It presents life as she sees it, in golden colors, with an optimism that isn't the optimism of those that have learned hope through adversity. Perhaps that is our loss. It is her gain. Through such books she—as the boy through books of adventure—may work up to novels that look into life through the eyes of manhood and womanhood.

I would note here that in the lists of novels read there was an amazing range of titles. Few students read any one book. This shows me that our school can hardly be doing its duty. The pupils are getting their suggestions for reading from widely different sources. There is little trace of a directed tendency. Their reading results from accident, from environment. Now, their environment should not—as far as we can affect it—be left to accident. Our task is to control it—even to supply it.

There are two dangers that some will mention. One is that the student will waste upon fiction time better spent in reading history or biography. If he neglects these for bad fiction, his case has already been considered. If for good fiction, I admit we have a problem. I regret that it seems to be outside the limitations of this paper.

The other danger is that a student, in random reading, may come upon books that will be of positive harm. Of course there are bad books, but there are not many that a student is liable to meet, and the little bad that gets into good books seldom does any harm. Some people's definition of bad books, however, differs from mine. To me a book is not bad merely if it contains bad words and bad people. I don't—with due regard to the censors of two continents—regard even *Blanco Posnet* or *Mrs. Warren's*

Profession as "bad books." I should not go out of my way to recommend them to a high-school student, but I should not dissuade him from reading them. To my mind what makes bad books is, as I said, not bad words or bad people, but what Parkman's Indian squaw denounced in the dog she killed for stealing meat—"a bad heart." Such books, if frankly talked over, may be rendered harmless. The young have, besides, a delightful immunity to the poisons that attack their elders. To the immature reader the most immoral book ever written—"Gulliver's Travels"—that despairing denial of the holy spirit in man—is an innocent story of fascinating adventure.

I feel sure of one thing. It is of no use to forbid a book. If an upper-grade boy insists, like one boy I know, upon reading Zola, Flaubert, and D'Annunzio, it is of no use to look shocked and say "Don't." The only way to do is to talk the books over with him, praising the good and blaming the bad. Teach him to appropriate the one and cast off the other. He must learn to do it. When he leaves school, he won't as a rule enter a monastery. Let him begin, with the novel, the selection that he must practice in the experience of life.

I must say a few things specifically about the reading of stories in magazines. The facts I have gathered are in this respect most encouraging. The magazine most read is the *Saturday Evening Post*. This paper may contain some mediocre stuff, but it contains some real literature. A hundred and thirty-seven out of a little over two hundred reported that they read it regularly. I should suggest, therefore, that stories from it might well be talked over in class, and that the best things in it be used in extension of home reading.

The *Ladies' Home Journal* came second on the list, the *Cosmopolitan* third. The magazines generally read by students are, in short, those generally read by the public, magazines of good quality—not of the highest literary standard, but a long way from the lowest. An important element is that each of them contains a few stories of the highest class. We must remember that some popular writers of today are the classics of tomorrow. The lady in *Cranford* despised Boz as vulgar. Today we try to persuade

our pupils to read *Pickwick* and to abstain from the latest humorist. Possibly some of us are now trying to coax our students not to read works that in 1950 will be required by the Syllabus.

To return to my main theme: In order to enable our pupils to get the most out of current fiction, we must do several things. First, we must make the fiction that we teach in school so interesting that they will want more. That means that we must like it and *let them see that we do*. Secondly, we must read a good deal of the sort of current fiction that we expect them to read, and even a certain part of what we want them not to read. Thirdly, we must keep before them a list of books that will be good for them. And we must not patronizingly recommend these from above. We must say, "This is a good book. I have enjoyed it and I want you to enjoy it too." And we must let some of the boys tell the class about the books they have read—encouraging them to speak with absolute sincerity. We must work at the level of those we teach. One cannot do slumming by telephone.

We aim to teach our students to share our pleasures. We must then begin by sharing with them those in which our pupils are fitted to share. We must show them what we get out of books. We must help them to find the best books. It is no use forbidding the half-good. We must praise it and lead on from it, up to the wholly good, to the real uplands of literature. These, some of us feel, rise far higher than the highest fiction. Be that as it may, we must see that our pupils get the good that fiction has to offer them. For in this, I repeat, lies the justification of teaching fiction. We are not teaching them to write novels. We are not teaching them to criticize novels. We are not even qualifying them to talk about novels. We are not preparing them to be examined. We are trying to show them how to get a wholesome pleasure out of good stories. We are trying to teach them to see through the eyes of great novelists that the world is interesting to watch, that it is good to live in, and we are trying—this is our topmost endeavor—to teach them to feel, as the greatest of novelists have felt, that human nature is a noble thing, that through all the confused pattern of life there runs a meaning and a mystery. No student, whose novel reading leads him to this, has wasted his time.